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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 1196
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000223

SIPDIS

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FROM CHARGE D'AFFAIRES RICHARD E. HOAGLAND
STATE FOR D, P, E, SCA/CEN
PASS TO USTDA DAN STEIN
ENERGY FOR EKIMOFF/THOMPSON
COMMERCE FOR HEUPER
USAID/W FOR EE/AA

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN'S BERDIMUHAMEDOV ONE YEAR ON: LET'S
SEIZE THE MOMENT

REF: ASHGABAT 0219

Classified By: CDA RICHARD E. HOAGLAND: 1.4 (B), (D)

1. (C) When "The Eternally Great Saparmurat Turkmenbashi" Niyazov died on December 21, 2006, U.S. foreign policy took the opportunity to approach Turkmenistan's soon-to-be new president, offering to "turn the page" in our bilateral relations. To the extent Turkmenistan was ready to engage with us, we were ready to engage without pre-conditions. It was a wise and far-sighted decision. The past year has shown that Turkmenistan's new president wants to move in a different direction from his destructive predecessor, but is not clear how to do it. This is our moment, and we must seize it.

THE TURN-AROUND

2. (C) Since his inauguration on February 14, 2007, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov has returned Turkmenistan to the family of nations. Whereas former President Niyazov operated as if the nation existed solely to serve his deranged delusions, Berdimuhamedov has clearly stated that the government exists to serve the people. By authoritarian Central Asian standards, Berdimuhamedov has positioned himself as a reasonable leader. He has

-- ended Turkmenistan's diplomatic isolation, making over a dozen foreign trips in his first year and receiving hundreds of diplomatic and business delegations;

-- begun to repair frozen relations with Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan, positioning himself as a partner in regional cooperation and integration;

-- consistently but without any fanfare gutted Niyazov's bizarre personality cult and has not advanced himself as a replacement; instead he increasingly portrays himself as a man of the people, traveling extensively around the country to meet workers from all sectors;

-- started to turn around Niyazov's depredations of education, health care, and culture;

-- stated clearly to U.S. visitors he wants Turkmenistan to develop a Western-style market economy;

-- created government bodies intended to impose fiscal responsibility and transparency;

-- begun to unify the dual exchange rates, a cash cow for corrupt insiders;

-- invited Western firms to submit "serious concrete proposals" to help develop Turkmenistan's hydrocarbon wealth, hosted Turkmenistan's first successful International Oil and Gas Exposition in many years, and has said explicitly he wants a Trans-Caspian Pipeline;

-- empowered the formerly empty shell of the Institute of Democracy and Human Rights to determine how to bring Turkmenistan into compliance with international standards;

-- established a commission to review prisoners' convictions and other abuses by law-enforcement agencies, and has released some political prisoners incarcerated by the previous regime; and

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-- maintained Turkmenistan's quiet but essential support for Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan with blanket over-flight clearances for about 1,500 aircraft a year and a refueling operation at Ashgabat International Airport that annually services about 120 aircraft with humanitarian cargo.
(NOTE: For a more extensive discussion of the changes during Berdimuhamedov's first year, see reftel. END NOTE.)

CONSTRAINTS

13. (C) But Berdimuhamedov faces formidable constraints. Most fundamental, Turkmenistan missed 15 years of reform and international contact, and had 70 years of only Soviet experience before that. The corrosive impact of this isolation should never be under-estimated. Niyazov's capriciously draconian regime caused a brain drain of an estimated 4,000 of Turkmenistan's own best and brightest as Niyazov sank ever further into solipsistic and occasionally homicidal delusion. The permanent bureaucracy that survived by keeping its head down and mouth shut still seems to prefer to scramble sideways to implement decrees from the top rather than to innovate from the bottom up. The destructive culture of Soviet corruption is all-pervasive.

14. (C) The Kremlin is determined that Turkmenistan be part of its "exclusive sphere of influence," and continually warns against the disaster and chaos that come with democracy. China shows by example that international political power, economic growth, and great wealth are possible without political reform.

15. (C) Less concrete but still a powerful constraint is international opinion that still too often thinks of Turkmenistan in terms of the reputation it developed under Niyazov as "Stalin's Disneyland," worthy only of being laughed at with a shudder and written off. Although it's partly Turkmenistan's fault for not yet welcoming foreign journalists with open arms, the international media still get it wrong. As recently as January 23, "The New York Times," reporting from Moscow, not from Ashgabat, placed Turkmenistan geographically on the Black Sea and skeptically wondered

"whether Berdimuhamedov's reforms will lead to greater liberalization or simply a recasting of the ubiquitous statues to the former leader in his own image." The writer quoted only non-resident "international human rights experts." Turkmen exiles, mostly in Europe and with their own understandable axes to grind, dominate Internet discussions of Turkmenistan, and Russian web sites still regularly rub Ashgabat's nose in its past.

THE POWER OF RESPECT

¶6. (C) We believe Berdimuhamedov himself is sincerely interested in transforming Turkmenistan -- not ceding power while doing it, but bringing Turkmenistan into the modern world -- but he doesn't know how. Most of what we take for granted in modern management, business, and education is alien to him, yet he still feels the imperative to change. This is our moment. A detailed, sustained, intensive engagement with the still-questing Turkmen president will pay dividends for the United States for a generation to come. But this demands a new level of U.S. commitment.

¶7. (C) Berdimuhamedov is well-disposed toward the United States. During his September 2007 visit to New York for the UN General Assembly, he met with students at Columbia

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University, academics at the Harriman Center, and business leaders at a Eurasia Group-sponsored luncheon. He is fond of telling trusted U.S. interlocutors that he was frankly surprised by the positive and respectful way he was received, and he reminisces freely about the energy and political engagement of American students. By contrast, he comments about his less-than-satisfactory reception in Brussels where he says he felt snubbed and belittled. He contrasts his reception in New York with his treatment in Brussels as "the difference between heaven and earth." The key word is respect.

¶8. (C) Well aware of their status in the world, Turkmen officials are enormously insecure. The great ace of American diplomacy is, by and large, we show honest respect for our interlocutors. An invitation now to Berdimuhamedov to visit Washington would establish a new level of rapport with him and signal -- to him and to others -- that we take him seriously. It would show recognition for his positive goals and would encourage him to do more and go further. By contrast, setting benchmarks he must meet to be "rewarded" with a Washington visit would be counter-productive. A White House meeting would be the high point of the visit, but such a visit should be a much larger introduction to official Washington, including in all three branches of government. A side-trip to Chicago, Houston, or elsewhere should be part of the mix. We have the opportunity to make an impact in a way that rarely occurs. Let's rise to the challenge now, vigorously, creatively.

HOAGLAND